

## Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance

By Robert Pirsig, 1974

Chapter 4: The riders arrive in Ellendale on a chilly morning, warm up, and continue heading west

Every Chautauqua should have a list somewhere of valuable things to remember that can be kept in some safe place for times of future need and inspiration. Details. And now, while the others are still snoring away wasting this beautiful morning sunlight — well — to sort of fill time —

What I have here is my list of valuable things to take on your next motorcycle trip across the Dakotas.

I've been awake since dawn. Chris is still sound asleep in the other bed. I started to roll over for more sleep but heard a rooster crowing and then became aware we are on vacation and there is no point in sleeping. I can hear John right through the motel partition sawing wood in there — unless it's Sylvia — no, that's too loud. Damned chain saw, it sounds like — .

I got so tired of forgetting things on trips like this, I made this up and store it in a file at home to check off when I am ready to go.

Most of the items are commonplace and need no comment. Some of them are peculiar to motorcycling and need some comment. Some of them are just plain peculiar and need a lot of comment. The list is divided into four parts: Clothing, Personal Stuff, Cooking and Camping Gear, and Motorcycle Stuff.

The first part, Clothing, is simple:

1. Two changes of underwear. 2. Long underwear. 3. One change of shirt and pants for each of us. I use Army-surplus fatigues. They're cheap, tough and don't show dirt. I had an item called "dress clothes" at first but John penciled "Tux" after this item. I was just thinking of something you might want to wear outside a filling station. 4. One sweater and jacket each. 5. Gloves. Unlined leather gloves are best because they prevent sunburn, absorb sweat and keep your hands cool. When you're going for an hour or two little things like this aren't important, but when you're going all day long day after day they become plenty important. 6. Cycle boots. 7. Rain gear.

8. Helmet and sunshade, 9. Bubble. This gives me claustrophobia, so I use it only in the rain, which otherwise at high speed stings your face like needles. 10. Goggles. I don't like windshields because they also close you in. These are some British laminated plate-glass goggles that work fine. The wind gets behind sunglasses. Plastic goggles get scratched up and distort vision.

The next list is Personal Stuff:

Combs. Billfold. Pocketknife. Memoranda booklet. Pen. Cigarettes and matches. Flashlight. Soap and plastic soap container. Toothbrushes and toothpaste. Scissors. APCs for headaches. Insect repellent. Deodorant (after a hot day on a cycle, your best friends don't need to tell you). Sunburn lotion. (On a cycle you don't notice sunburn until you stop, and then it's too late. Put it on early.) Band-Aids. Toilet paper. Washcloth (this can go into a plastic box to keep other stuff from getting damp). Towel.

Books. I don't know of any other cyclist who takes books with him. They take a lot of space, but I have three of them here anyway, with some loose sheets of paper in them for writing. These are:

1. The shop manual for this cycle. 2. A general troubleshooting guide containing all the technical information I can never keep in my head. This is Chilton's Motorcycle Troubleshooting Guide written by Ocee Rich and sold by Sears, Roebuck. 3. A copy of Thoreau's Walden — which Chris has never heard and which can be read a hundred times without exhaustion. I try always to pick a book far over his head and read it as a basis for questions and answers, rather than without interruption. I read a sentence or two, wait for him to come up with his usual barrage of questions, answer them, then read another sentence or two. Classics read well this way. They must be written this way. Sometimes we have spent a whole evening reading and talking and discovered we have only covered two or three pages. It's a form of reading done a century ago — when Chautauquas were popular. Unless you've tried it you can't imagine how pleasant it is to do it this way.

I see Chris is sleeping over there completely relaxed, none of his normal tension. I guess I won't wake him up yet.

Camping Equipment includes:

1. Two sleeping bags. 2. Two ponchos and one ground cloth. These convert into a tent and also protect the luggage from rain while you are traveling. 3. Rope. 4. U. S. Geodetic Survey maps of an area where we hope to do some hiking. 5. Machete. 6. Compass. 7. Canteen. 1 I couldn't find this anywhere when we left. I think the kids must have lost it somewhere. 8. Two Army-surplus mess kits with knife, fork and spoon. 9. A collapsible Sterno stove with one medium-sized can of Sterno. This is an experimental purchase. I haven't used it yet. When it rains or when you're above the timberline firewood is a problem. 10. Some aluminum screw-top tins. For lard, salt, butter, flour, sugar. A mountaineering supply house sold us these years ago. 11. Brillo, for cleaning. 12. Two aluminum-frame backpacks.

Motorcycle Stuff. A standard tool kit comes with the cycle and is stored under the seat. This is supplemented with the following:

A large, adjustable open-end wrench. A machinist's hammer. A cold chisel. A taper punch. A pair of tire irons. A tire-patching kit. A bicycle pump. A can of molybdenum disulfide spray for the chain. (This has tremendous penetrating ability into the inside of each roller where it really counts, and the lubricating superiority of molybdenum disulfide is well known. Once it has dried off, however, it

ought to be supplemented with good old SAE-30 engine oil.) Impact driver. A point file. Feeler gauge. Test lamp.

Spare parts include:

Plugs. Throttle, clutch and brake cables. Points, fuses, headlight and taillight bulbs, chain-coupling link with keeper, cotter pins, baling wire. Spare chain (this is just an old one that was about shot when I replaced it, enough to get to a cycle shop if the present one goes).

And that's about it. No shoelaces.

It would probably be normal about this time to wonder what sort of U-Haul trailer all this is in. But it's not as bulky, really, as it sounds.

I'm afraid these other characters will sleep all day if I let them. The sky outside is sparkling and clear, it's a shame to waste it like this.

I go over finally and give Chris a shake. His eyes pop open, then he sits bolt upright uncomprehending.

"Shower time," I say.

I go outside. The air is invigorating. In fact.. .Christ!. ..it is cold out. I pound on the Sutherlands' door.

"Yahp," comes John's sleepy voice through the door. "Umhmhhh. Yahp."

It feels like autumn. The cycles are wet with dew. No rain today. But cold! It must be in the forties.

While waiting I check the engine oil level and tires, and bolts, and chain tension. A little slack there, and I get out the tool kit and tighten it up. I'm really getting anxious to get going.

I see that Chris dresses warmly and we are packed and on the road, and it is definitely cold. Within minutes all the heat of the warm clothing is drained out by the wind and I am shivering with big shivers. Bracing.

It ought to warm up as soon as the sun gets higher in the sky. About half an hour of this and we'll be in Ellendale for breakfast. We should cover a lot of miles today on these straight roads.

If it weren't so damn cold this would be just gorgeous riding. Low-angled dawn sun striking what looks almost like frost covering those fields, but I guess it's just dew, sparkling and kind of misty. Dawn shadows everywhere make it look less flat than yesterday. All to ourselves. Nobody's even up yet, it looks like. My watch says six-thirty. The old glove above it looks like it's got frost on it, but I guess it's just residues from the soaking last night. Good old beat-up gloves. They are so stiff now from the cold I can hardly straighten my hand out.

I talked yesterday about caring, I care about these moldy old riding gloves. I smile at them flying through the breeze beside me because they have been there for so many years and are so old and so tired and so rotten there is something kind of humorous about them. They have become filled with oil and sweat and dirt and splattered bugs and now when I set them down flat on a table, even when they are not cold, they won't stay flat. They've got a memory of their own. They cost only three dollars and have been restitched so many times it is getting impossible to repair them, yet I take a lot of time and pains to do it anyway because I can't imagine any new pair taking their place. That is impractical, but practicality isn't the whole thing with gloves or with anything else.

The machine itself receives some of the same feelings. With over 27,000 on it it's getting to be something of a high-miler, an old-timer, although there are plenty of older ones running. But over the miles, and I think most cyclists will agree with this, you pick up certain feelings about an individual machine that are unique for that one individual machine and no other. A friend who owns a cycle of the same make, model and even same year brought it over for repair, and when I test rode it afterward it was hard to believe it had come

from the same factory years ago. You could see that long ago it had settled into its own kind of feel and ride and sound, completely different from mine. No worse, but different.

I suppose you could call that a personality. Each machine has its own, unique personality which probably could be defined as the intuitive sum total of everything you know and feel about it. This personality constantly changes, usually for the worse, but sometimes surprisingly for the better, and it is this personality that is the real object of motorcycle maintenance. The new ones start out as good-looking strangers and, depending on how they are treated, degenerate rapidly into bad-acting grouches or even cripples, or else turn into healthy, good-natured, long-lasting friends. This one, despite the murderous treatment it got at the hands of those alleged mechanics, seems to have recovered and has been requiring fewer and fewer repairs as time goes on.

There it is! Ellendale!

A water tower, groves of trees and buildings among them in the morning sunlight. I've just given in to the shivering which has been almost continuous the whole trip. The watch says seven-fifteen.

A few minutes later we park by some old brick buildings. I turn to John and Sylvia who have pulled up behind us. "That was cold!" I say.

They just stare at me fish-eyed.

"Bracing, what?" I say. No answer.

I wait until they are completely off, then see that John is trying to untie all their luggage. He is having trouble with the knot. He gives up and we all move toward the restaurant.

I try again. I'm walking backward in front of them toward the restaurant, feeling a little manic from the ride, wringing my hands and laughing. "Sylvia! Speak to me!" Not a smile.

I guess they really were cold.

They order breakfast without looking up.

Breakfast ends, and I say finally, "What next?"

John says slowly and deliberately, "We're not leaving here until it warms up." He has a sheriff-at-sundown tone in his voice, which I suppose makes it final.

So John and Sylvia and Chris sit and stay warm in the lobby of the hotel adjoining the restaurant, while I go out for a walk.

I guess they're kind of mad at me for getting them up so early to ride through that kind of stuff. When you're stuck together like this, I figure small differences in temperament are bound to show up. I remember, now that I think of it. I've never been cycling with them before one or two o'clock in the afternoon, although for me dawn and early morning is always the greatest time for riding.

The town is clean and fresh and unlike the one we woke up in this morning. Some people are on the street and are opening stores and saying, "Good morning" and talking and commenting about how cold it is. Two thermometers on the shady side of the street read 42 and 46 degrees. One in the sun reads 65 degrees.

After a few blocks the main street goes onto two hard, muddy tracks into a field, past a quonset hut full of farm machinery and repair tools, and then ends in a field. A man standing in the field is looking at me suspiciously, wondering what I am doing, probably, as I look into the quonset hut. I return down the street, find a chilly bench and stare at the motorcycle. Nothing to do.

It was cold all right, but not that cold. How do John and Sylvia ever get through Minnesota winters? I wonder. There's kind of a glaring inconsistency here, that's almost too obvious to dwell on. If they can't stand physical discomfort and they can't stand technology, they've got a little compromising to do. They depend on technology and condemn it at the same time. I'm sure they know that and that just contributes to their dislike of the whole situation. They're not presenting a logical thesis, they're just reporting how it is. But three farmers are coming into town now, rounding the corner in that brand-new pickup truck. I'll bet with them it's just the other way around. They're going to show off that truck and their tractor and that new washing machine and they'll have the tools to fix them if they go wrong, and know how to use the tools. They value technology. And they're the ones who need it the least. If all technology stopped, tomorrow, these people would know how to make out. It would be rough, but they'd survive.

John and Sylvia and Chris and I would be dead in a week. This condemnation of technology is ingratitude, that's what it is.

Blind alley, though. If someone's ungrateful and you tell him he's ungrateful, okay, you've called him a name. You haven't solved anything.

A half hour later the thermometer by the hotel door reads 53 degrees. Inside the empty main dining room of the hotel I find them, looking restless. They seem, by their expressions, to be in a better mood though, and John says optimistically, "I'm going to put on everything I own, and then we'll make it all right."

He goes out to the cycles, and when he comes back says, "I sure hate to unpack all that stuff, but I don't want another ride like that last one." He says it is freezing in the men's room, and since there is no one else in the dining room, he crosses behind a table back from where we are sitting, and I am sitting at the table, talking to Sylvia, and then I look over and there is John, all decked out in a full-length set of pale-blue long underwear. He is smirking from ear to ear at how silly he looks. I stare at his glasses lying on the table for a moment and then say to Sylvia:

"You know, just a moment ago we were sitting here talking to Clark Kent — see, there's his glasses — and now all of a sudden — Lois, do you suppose? — "

John howls. "CHICKENMAN ! "

He glides over the varnished lobby floor like a skater, does a handspring, then glides back. He raises one arm over his head and then crouches as if starting for the sky. "I'm ready, here I go!" He shakes his head sadly. "Jeez, I hate to bust through that nice ceiling, but my X-ray vision tells me somebody's in trouble." Chris is giggling.

"We'll all be in trouble if you don't get some clothes on," Sylvia says.

John laughs. "An exposer, hey? 'The Ellendale revealer!' " He stunts around some more, then begins to put his clothes on over the underwear. He says, "Oh no, oh no, they wouldn't do that. Chickenman and the police have an understanding. They know who's on the side of law and order and justice and decency and fair play for everyone."

When we hit the highway again it is still chilly, but not like it was. We pass through a number of towns and gradually, almost imperceptibly, the sun warms us up, and my feelings warm up with it. The tired feeling wears off completely and the wind and sun feel good now, making it real. It's happening, just from the warming of the sun, the road and green prairie farmland and buffeting wind coming together. And soon it is nothing but beautiful warmth and wind and speed and sun down the empty road. The last chills of the morning are thawed by the warm air. Wind and more sun and more smooth road.

So green this summer and so fresh.

There are white and gold daisies among the grass in front of an old wire fence, a meadow with some cows and far in the distance a low rising of the land with something golden on it. Hard to know what it is. No need to know.

Where there is a slight rise in the road the drone of the motor becomes heavier. We top the rise, see a new spread of land before us, the road descends and the drone of the engine falls away again. Prairie. Tranquil and detached.

Later, when we stop, Sylvia has tears in her eyes from the wind, and she stretches out her arms and says, "It's so beautiful. It's so empty."

I show Chris how to spread his jacket on the ground and use an extra shirt for a pillow. He is not at all sleepy but I tell him to lie down anyway, he'll need the rest. I open up my own jacket to soak up more heat. John gets his camera out.

After a while he says, "This is the hardest stuff in the world to photograph. You need a three-hundred-and-sixty degree lens, or something. You see it, and then you look down in the ground glass and it's just nothing. As soon as you put a border on it, it's gone."

I say, "That's what you don't see in a car, I suppose."

Sylvia says, "Once when I was about ten we stopped like this by the road and I used half a roll of film taking pictures. And when the pictures came back I cried. There wasn't anything there."

"When are we going to get going?" Chris says.

"What's your hurry?" I ask.

"I just want to get going."

"There's nothing up ahead that's any better than it is right here."

He looks down silently with a frown. "Are we going to go camping tonight?" he asks. The Sutherlands look at me apprehensively. "Are we?" he repeats.

"We'll see later," I say.

"Why later?"

"Because I don't know now."

"Why don't you know now?"

"Well, I just don't know now why I just don't know."

John shrugs that it's okay.

"This isn't the best camping country," I say. "There's no cover and no water." But suddenly I add, "All right, tonight we'll camp out." We had talked about it before.

So we move down the empty road. I don't want to own these prairies, or photograph them, or change them, or even stop or even keep going. We are just moving down the empty road.